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ABSTRACT

This document, which is described by its author as a "critical autobiography", traces one adult educator's 15-year journey from graduate school and into the field of adult literacy and the process of his development into what he calls "an American scholar." The autobiographical narrative is developed against the backdrop of the tension stemming from the opposing viewpoints and objectives of humanistic and social scholarship on the one hand and the more pragmatic institutions of modern life and work on the other hand. The specific topics discussed are as follows: (1) education and work as ambivalent pathways to identity in modern America (the life of the mind versus the world of action); (2) the author's experiences in graduate school in the 1980s (the quest for personal knowledge and the academy; status anxiety; the general exams for a doctoral degree); (3) practice in search of theory (existential angst; teaching; contract cleaning management; academic pursuits); (4) toward praxis and continuing tensions (entering the field of adult literacy; scholarly pursuits revisited; organizational change agent; discovering the field of literacy education; and practitioner/research dualism revisited). (Contains 74 references.) (MN)

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Re-Inventing the Self: Passages into History, Business, and Adult Literacy—An American Historian in Search of a Calling

George Demetrion

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RE-INVENTING THE SELF: PASSAGES INTO HISTORY, BUSINESS, AND ADULT LITERACY— AN AMERICAN HISTORIAN IN SEARCH OF A CALLING

From the end of the earth I will cry to You, when my heart is overwhelmed; Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
_____Psalms 61:2 R.K.J.

Every man of native power, who might take a higher degree, and refuses to do so, because examinations interfere with the free following out of his more immediate intellectual aims, deserves well of his country, and in a rightly organized community, would not be made to suffer for his independence. With many men the passing of these extraneous tests is a very grievous interference indeed.

___William James, The Ph.D Octopus

Historical Influences on the Modern Self

The Life of the Mind and the World of Action

Despite enormous efforts, particularly in modern social philosophy to mitigate the mind/matter dualism pervasive throughout Western experience (Bernstein, 1983; Calhoone, 1988; Toliman, 1990), an enduring split remains. A structural manifestation of this polarity occurs with the relegation of intellectual activity to the academy, while "real world" pragmatists absorb themselves with the task of stabilizing complex institutions that often matter greatly to the daily lives of people seeking to meet important needs and aspirations in ambiguous social settings. From such a dualistic framework, the intellectual all too often assumes the epistemological stance of detached observer where the life of the mind is seemingly unaffected by practical constraints. Those enmeshed in the "world's" activities, particularly policymakers and public administrators, meanwhile, react to the immediacy of environmental pressures that often preclude significant paradigm shifting.

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Phenomenology, critical theory, deconstructionism, hermeneutics, neo-pragmatism, and ethnography represent a dazzling post-positivistic quest to ground humanistic and social science scholarship contextually within "lived experience" (although not always "privileging" the subject) without sacrificing reasoned argumentation (La Capra and Kaplan, 1982; Bernstein, 1983; Gunn, 1987; Gubrium and Silverman, 1989). Even with this creative *intellectual* counterthrust, the thought/action dualism, which interprets the dominant scholarly task as *detachment* from that observed, remains pervasive within the academy. For the more "pragmatic" institutions of modern life the split is often reflected in an anti-intellectual bias against theory in favor of more "realistic" postures to assure the effective functioning of a given enterprise. This excursion into what I shall refer to as "critical autobiography," details a fifteen year transition through these tensions as I moved from graduate school study in history to becoming a program manager for an adult literacy reading center (Parks, 1986; Demetrion, 1993).

Education and Work as Ambivalent Pathways to Identity in Modern America

There is much ambivalence over the complex relationships between education and work as pathways to identity and achievement in modern American culture (Leinberger and Tucker, 1991). A pervasive, popular view about education contends that it is means oriented rather than intrinsically valued in its functional utility of facilitating material and professional success. Work, also, is viewed similarly, at least in part. This seems belied at least to a degree by a religious-like work ethos reflective of a middle-class outlook where identity is closely linked to careerism. Yet, an enduring ambivalence towards

work as means or ends seems evident in an alternating bourgeois envy/disdain toward the wealthy and an all-too-evident intolerance or pity toward the poor (Ehrenreich, 1989).

From this, it is easy to draw the conclusion that the underlying value system supporting both middle-class education and work in the United States is the quest for upward mobility. As far as surface impressions go, there is much to this. Yet, for many, the quest for abundance within the culture of the United States is symbolically linked to the desire for personal transcendence against the constraints of life expressed through the metaphor of freedom (Bellah, Madson, Sullivan, Swindler and Tipton, 1985, pp. 23-25). Incorporated into the vision of America, as land of opportunity and hope (however false), is more than *merely* the quest for material satisfaction. Rather, it is the pursuit of happiness in personal fulfillment through the possibility of psychic transcendence or forever "becoming" (Lifton, 1993, Steele, 1987), particularly as an expressive middle class, cultural ideal. In an earlier era, the frontier served as a primary vehicle for this phenomenon, at least in the imagination of the American mind (Noble, 1985, pp. pp. 16-26; McNurtry, 1985; Lifton, 1993, pp. 34-36). In the modern era, particularly among the suburban, baby-boom generation, education and work serve a similar function at least potentially, especially for those whom Leinberger and Tucker characterize disparagingly as seekers of the "authentic self" (Leinberger and Tucker, 1991, pp. 14-17, 269-299).

However illusory, I have embraced much of this mythology. Specifically, I have viewed education and work as at times alternatively and at other times as complementary vehicles for personal empowerment, or, to state it more directly, as avenues of transcendence against the more seemingly limited circumstances available in a less reflective and more routinized daily life pattern. While searching for coherent

relationships between the life of the mind and the world of action, I have often experienced profound tension between these spheres, which, in their polarized constructs, seem to represent opposite ways of being. Even as both offer the possibility and illusion of transcendence, I have, at times, relied excessively on the one polarity by screening out the voice of the other; hence, alienation against myself has sometimes been the price of excessive preoccupation and seemingly inescapable during specific times of my life.

There are no simple resolutions to these tensions as the thought/action polarity rubs up against the cultural myth of an Emersonian quest for the organic unity of an American Self in harmony with nature (Steele, 1987, pp. 14-39). John Dewey reconstructed this vision for the twentieth century by linking self and nature to, if not the ideal, than to "the better" (my concept) society. In light of the pressing problems of industrial capitalism, intensive ethnic and cultural pluralism, and sharp social conflict of the early twentieth century, Dewey (1927) kept his aim on the "Great Community." Although an unrealizable vision, Dewey viewed it as a regulative ideal to be worked toward through education, critical inquiry, and the development of consensual social networks of participatory democracy (Rockerfeller, 1991; Westbrook, 1991).

My autobiographical odyssey should be viewed, therefore, as more than simply a developmental crisis, as important as this is in coming to terms with life histories (Erikson, 1968; Gillian, 1982; Kegan, 1982; Kolb, 1984; Daloz, 1986; Parks, 1986). Rather, it is a particular response to the Emersonian-Deweyan vision for an idealized American Self and its accompanying contradictions by a member of the post World War II baby-boom generation, seeking a fit relationship between identity and vocation in the 1980s and 1990s (Whalen and Flack, 1989; Leinberger and Tucker, 1991; Roof, 1993).

Theory in Search of Practice: Graduate School in the 1980's - An Experiential Odyssey

The Quest for Personal Knowledge and the Academy

Throughout my adult life, I have persistently linked intellectual development with my on-going quest for personal identity. At times I have drawn upon school and scholarship as a defense mechanism against the "felt" realities of daily life. More fundamentally, I have drawn upon intellectual activity as a means of attaining a degree of personal transcendence. More prosaically, I sought to achieve what the adult educator Jack Mezirow refers to as "perspective transformation" (1981, 1990, 1994), through new insight, often leading to transformed action, attitudes, and values, that otherwise may have remained closed (Parks, 1986, pp. 133-176). Without the formal and informal study of history, social theory, psychology, and religious studies, particularly, as profound pathways to my life-project search for meaning, in all likelihood, I would have merely personalized "adjustment" issues without a vivid regard for their varied contexts.

Circuitously or directly, much of my intellectual activity has resonated with a desire either to probe into a deeply rooted personal issue or to make an effective connection between an object of study and my own, subjective experience. In either case, I have drawn upon the acquisition of knowledge predominantly to achieve some type of "perspective transformation" for the purposes of enhancing self identity and the ability to master and/or cope with the exigencies of on-going life experience. This orientation has proven considerably more compelling than any direct linkage between intellectual development and professional advancement, however much the latter resonates profoundly with my psyche and is tied to my broader life goals. The need to

draw upon intellectual resources as a means of enabling any given "self" to move forward, however indeterminate, has represented a more fundamental source of motivation than the pursuits of ends that have appeared unrealizable to me, however logical or "appropriate" others may have deemed them.

This propensity has served as an inner guide to keep research areas stimulating and relevant. At times this has meshed well with the challenges and requirements of formal academic institutions, although my relationship to them has proven characteristically problematical. I experienced much ambivalence in a particularly acute manner while enrolled in a Ph.D. program in United States History at The University of Connecticut (UCONN) during the early 1980s. I found coursework generally stimulating, but the requirements for the general exams represented for me, an impassible barrier, requiring me to confront with heightened intensity anew, the relationship between personal being and academic knowledge. This, in turn, propelled an intensive search for career clarity that might prove both functional and congruent with my identity and value system.

Part of the difficulty at UCONN stemmed from my ambivalence about entering the program. Advanced schooling, in part, provided a way of avoiding immediate career decisions and possibly also of postponing general maturational needs (Erikson, 1968, pp. 128-135). The seemingly logical career objective of becoming a college professor did not appear personally realistic given the time required to complete the program of which I had serious doubts about ever finishing even from the start. I had attained a master's degree in history in 1978, yet the central issues I confronted throughout the 1970s focused on the personal and religious. I had been enmeshed in the late 1960s

countercultural search for personal re-birth and cultural transformation and as part of that quest, became "born-again" into evangelical Christianity. In significant ways entering a traditional doctoral program in history did not represent a coherent direction for personal, academic, or career development.

There were other paths to follow and I cannot conclude that entering the program may have been a mistake in important ways. Yet, given the inevitability of imperfect decision-making, based upon the choices available within the psycho-social sphere out of which I operated, undertaking the program in 1979 appeared "life-giving" in many respects. Considering the intensity of my desire for knowledge (experiential and academic) and the years of historical study that I had already undertaken notwithstanding the detours, the program served potentially as an avenue to develop latent talents. It helped me to break through to fresh insight into personal identity, and possibly by concentrating on religious history, I thought it might serve as a discovery process in integrating the academic and personal issues that I had been struggling with throughout the 1970s. Although not exactly as intended, all of these potentialities came to fruition in some highly idiosyncratic ways.

Despite the reservations, I experienced much growth in the coursework through seminar discussions, reading, and essay writing. Independent study projects contributed much to a sense of "owning the process" of intellectual development which more than compensated, at least initially, for the nagging questions that underlay the viability of my participation in the program. Besides, there appeared no other place than the university to develop the kind of cultural knowledge that I sought in what seemed to me, a stifling anti-intellectual culture of so much of what passes as "adult" experience in modern U.S.

society. I was particularly troubled by the preoccupation with "pragmatic" adjustment and the compensating pursuit of "leisure activities."

Although I intuitively sensed it unlikely that I would ever complete the program, I felt compelled to engage the process if for no other reason than to move beyond the given of my then, current intellectual and personal identity. However seemingly escapist from a practical perspective, the program represented a door I felt compelled to open, despite the apparent lack of direction it provided, particularly on any resolution of my career identity as it appeared at the time. As it has turned out, the mental discipline along with the personal and social knowledge that I have attained as a result of engaging an intense intellectual process, has played a crucial role in my career orientation as an adult literacy educator. It has provided resources that have undergirded an activist stance at work with a well-developed conceptual grasp of the many underlying dynamics (micro and macro) that have given shape to my workplace environments in the field of adult literacy.

Consequently, I am currently able to place the *practice* of teaching adults how to read and write within a broader *praxis* that interprets literacy metaphorically as meaning-making (Auerbach, 1992). This holds out at least the possibility of continuously redescribing any given reality through the symbolic power of language, whether spoken or written (Tuman, 1987, pp. 9-33; Lestz, Demetrion, and Smith, 1994). In significant ways, the ability to reconstruct reality through the metaphor of literacy has played an important role in the development of learning climates and organizational cultures in which I have worked as a literacy professional, at least as an underlying ideal.

There is something implicit in who I am that would have likely moved me to seek transcendence in whatever situation I found myself (Parks, 1986, p. 19; Gunn, 1987, p. 74). According to cultural commentator Giles Gunn:

> It is not that we keep experiencing things beyond the ken of our experience: it is only that the ken of experience keeps enlarging as we discover new ways to construe its components (Gunn, 1987, p. 130).

Nonetheless, without the UCONN experience, my intellectual resources would not have likely been developed as a literacy educator that allowed me to push both theory and practice as thoroughly and complexly as I have done so over the past decade or more. I could not have foreseen how the future would unfold, but I knew implicitly how intensely my quest for personal being demanded the kind of intellectual exercise that would strengthen my sense of self. I was also aware of the importance of historical knowledge in fortifying my sense of identity as a counterweight to the preoccupation with personal development that characterized my life journey throughout the 1970s. The need for this kind of growth proved much more powerful than any requirement to resolve my career direction, notwithstanding how dissatisfied I felt in that area. Although circuitous, I had a vague sense that the program would provide the scaffolding I required in order to enter more fully into the arena of "real life," as I sought to engage it, face forward rather than in retreat.

Status Anxiety

Despite the concentrated intellectual development the program afforded, I, along with many of my colleagues, experienced considerable duress in our socially marginal status as graduate students. College teaching positions in history during the 1980s were severely limited and prospects did not appear much brighter for the 1990s. This was due in part to demographic variables, with a declining birthrate of those born in the 1960s

juxtaposed to the explosive baby-boom population of my generation. A neo-conservative social climate exacerbated the demographic dilemma for potential history professors. In the 1980s, greater numbers of students turned toward vocationalism, seeking a college education more to obtain specific job skills and legitimizing credentials than broad, humanistic knowledge of culture, society, and politics. For many of us pursuing graduate studies in the humanities as a way of working out meaningful relationships between personal, academic, and career development, the future appeared dim. By focusing on the time consuming requirements of the Ph.D. program and the compulsions toward perfectionism, which it engendered in so many of us, the future appeared easy to evade, at least for a time.

An excessively lengthy program, with many Ph.D. candidates taking well over ten years to complete compounded these dilemmas. In addition to the many delays inherent within dissertation writing, the general exams represented a major stumbling block for even the best of students. It was a problem for me because of a learning style that requires deep contextuality between knowledge and experience, along with considerable scaffolding support systems, resources I felt unable to tap upon for the general exams.

The Dreaded General Exams

The Ph.D. exams are a University requirement, although departments exercise considerable leeway in their administration. Some departments give them sequentially over two or more semesters as students complete coursework in specific areas. Others allow take home exams which the history department finally adapted at least on an experimental basis in the late 1980s (Stave, 1988-89, p. 2). The Education Department in the late 1980s required only three exams instead of the usual four. During my active

enrollment (1979-1983), the History department required four exams to be taken within a several week period under tightly-controlled four hour time periods, with each exam covering such broad fields as the Social and Intellectual History of the United States from 1607 (sic) to the present.

A literature explosion that grows exponentially each year, making it impossible for even the most astute professional historian to "cover" the field of U.S. History compounded the vastness of the time periods. The professors actually did not expect such mastery, yet the anxiety aroused in anticipation of the general exams and the nature of the literature rich historiographically based seminars tended to exacerbate such a compensating psychology of mastery among many of us. It was not uncommon for Ph.D. students to study between one-to-two years for the exams, after the completion of coursework, often, for several hours per day. For those who failed first, and sometimes second attempts, the "psychosis" became even more intense. As one of my colleagues who eventually completed the program, put it:

> Preparation for the general exams, in fact, became so intense, so as to cause so much anxiety; so much to read in so little time. It came to the point where one doubted his or her capability to manage this academic rite of passage. It seemed the passing of the general exams overshadowed the writing of the dissertation (personal correspondence).

Viewed from a positivistic premise, a case could be made that the general exams provide an "objective" assessment of knowledge and that in order to become a professional historian, as in any other field, certain standards of performance are required. The professors would maintain, moreover, that graduate students are not expected to attain anything like a complete mastery of the literature, but should be ready to convey a broad, yet sophisticated overview of their fields of study.

I take no issue with these objectives. Assessment is essential both for the intellectual development of the student and in order to assure high standards for the profession. What I question and what I found irreconcilable with my own learning style, was the single means of assessment available, once coursework had been completed; the timed four, four hour-exams to respond intelligently to three weighty questions on each test. The exams provided no scope for differences in learning styles, nor adequately reflected the skills and knowledge that professional historians exercise in their daily craft of teaching and research. Yet other means of evaluation were available, such as more critically evaluative teaching assistantships and the profuse essay writing required in seminar classes. The rigidity of the exams, moreover, violated fundamental canons of adult education pedagogy which elevates the centrality of subjective experience in the mastery of knowledge, not in contrast to the object of learning, but in creative interaction with it (Freire, 1970; Knowles, 1975; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1985, 1990, 1994). As an anonymous reviewer of an earlier version of this essay put it, "The dreaded exams isolated each student from his/her peers and from the faculty on the other side of the barrier" (personal correspondence).

According to experiential learning theorist David A. Kolb:

> To learn is not the special province of a single specialized realm of human functioning such as cognition or perception. It involves the integrated functioning of the total organism—thinking, feeling, perceiving and behaving (Kolb, 1984, p. 31).

Coursework stimulated these many dimensions of learning as did a later departmental reform, the introduction of take home general exams well after I left the program, that more closely approximated the reflective qualities of essay writing that a historian actually utilizes in practice. By contrast, the timed exams illuminate only that knowledge

which is immediately accessible to an individual and some people perform better in *that format* than others.

For me, thinking is a concentrated activity that I cannot easily compartmentalize into short time sequences. I need opportunity to ruminate, to follow divergent leads, and to postpone commitment to a particular set of ideas until they find some type of authentic resonation with my being. This type of thinking cannot be rushed, although I have developed various print-based "compensatory" mechanisms for teaching and previously for research (I no longer require them as much for the latter) through elaborate notes that I still need for any form of public speaking, however "seemingly" simple. It was the lack of such accessible support, which drove home the existential certainty that I could not pass the general exams as then constituted no matter how long I studied for them. Although the analogy does not pertain to the *substance* of the exams, the *process* represented for me, something akin to what the Brazilian adult literacy educator, Paulo Freire, characterizes as the "banking" concept of education where "[w]ords are emptied of their concreteness and become a hallow, alienated, and alienating verbosity" (Freire 1970, p. 57). The form froze me up which no amount of study could loosen. In a word, I was trapped in what was for me, a sterile intellectual requirement that impeded the natural flow of my knowledge through the dynamic energies of my own idiosyncratic learning bent.

The relentless reality of the general exams as then constituted and my existential "certainty" in not possessing the ability to perform in the expected manner brought about what Anthony Giddens refers to as "fateful moments" in my personal biography:

> *Fateful moments* are those when individuals are called on to make decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their

> future lives. Fateful moments are highly consequential for a person's destiny. Fateful moments are times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence (Giddens, 1991, p. 112-113).

My journey to UCONN was driven more by existential issues than by "purely" academic interest. That is, in no small measure, I utilized the program as a form of what Gidden refers to as "Life planning: the strategic adoption of lifestyle options, organized in terms of the individual's projected lifespan and normally focused through the notion of risk" Giddens, 1991, p. 243). The risk that I took on entering the program was that the sense of personal transcendence ("perspective transformation") that I would undergo, would offset any inevitable delay in terms of vocational development where, in any event, career paths for a variety of personal and societal reasons, appeared bleak. At age thirty, I lacked much of a sense of personal empowerment to cope effectively with a society, which I regarded in many ways as alienating and oppressive and possessing only an extremely thin sense of "community." UCONN, for me, served as a training ground for strengthening my ego resolve to master some aspect of an indifferent environment, congruent with my deepest aspirations. I hoped in however a small way to help humanize some creative socio-cultural space where I could make my way in the world.

Under other circumstances, a brighter job market for university history professors and a more flexible exam process, I might have "resolved" my existential problem through an academic vocation. The dilemma over the exams, though, brought to a critical fore, issues that I had partially buried, in part, though, to gain creative, constructive strength, to more effectively face them.

Practice in Search of Theory: Polarized Consciousness

Existential Angst

Lacking throughout my attempt to study for the general exams was any sense of connection between the subject matter and my own "informational processing" system.

The crisis, did, however, stimulate an intensive personal search, resulting in a re-evaluation of my priorities. The exams as an impassible barrier brought to the center of my attention the need to re-focus my life. They graphically "deconstructed" any lingering hope that I may have possessed of attaining a college teaching position. Only by exiting the Ph.D. program, therefore, did I feel able to regain control over my life and more fully confront anew partially repressed personal and vocational issues lurking throughout my tenure at UCONN. Critical reflection and scholarship would remain essential to my personal identity, but I had to reinterpret their relationship in the light of a pressing need at age thirty-five to move more deliberately into the arena of work, with the university option closed and no clear direction to pursue.

Most important to me at that time was to keep the creative process of my "evolving self" (Kegan, 1982) open even for the short run against what I perceived as extremely powerful societal, cultural, and psychological forces operating within American life. These, I worried, could place me in a more "fated" historical circumstance and rob my control even of the mini-sector of my own immediate existence. I struggled under an implicit hope that if I pushed my "quest for being" to its limits, that I would find a way out of the impasse, to establish what the theologian Paul Tillich refers to as "a new being" (1955). Failing that, perhaps I would die before I became entrapped into an existence devoid of a meaningful identity.

My Christian background spoke of deeper truths wherein "re-birth" and "resurrection" were experienced through death and crucifixion to old ways, enabling "new worlds" to perpetually come into being through the Spirit of God. Although remaining faintly present as an existentialist faith, I had "moved beyond" an earlier conversionist theology rooted in the American evangelical tradition that throughout the 1970s had provided a sense of certainty that was no longer available to me. Instead, I was moving toward a more fluid, experiential, what I would later come to understand as a "Death-of-God theology." This perspective would have to verify the authenticity of the

core Christian message in secular tones through the exigencies of lived historical experience without the ruse of "God talk;" overt religious language and "foundational" religious beliefs (Miller, 1973, pp. 431-435).

Thus, the spiritual literalism of "born-again" evangelicalism that characterized my faith throughout much of the 1970s no longer provided a convincing anchoring point that would enable me to hover above history, heaven-bound. I might experience ultimate "resurrection" from the "travails of this life," but only through risking the existential possibility of a loss of meaning, purpose, and control that the new environment threatened to engender even as it offered the possibility of new life. I felt there was no choice, but to fully face the issues of vocation and identity that confronted me, and the resources that I drew upon were primarily secular. I had not rejected religion, but the Christianity that I had known in the 1970s, remained a muted, "shadow voice" during this tumultuous period between 1983-1987 as I attempted to "find myself" through part-time teaching, contract cleaning management, and independent scholarship. That shadow voice would re-emerge in the 1990s as a "postmodern" evangelical faith, that, in the terminology of William James, was "twice-born" as a hermeneutical dynamic that much more fully confronted and was confronted by modern and postmodern secular experience (Brueggemann, 1993; Milbank, 1990).

Teaching

Intensified by the aridness of exam preparation, my intellectual needs shifted from the private absorption of scholarship to the public role of teaching. At UCONN, teaching assistantships, where I led discussion sessions in undergraduate history classes, satisfied that desire to a large degree, by illuminating my effectiveness in this role in which I thrived. Yet given the emphasis in the program on the production of scholarship, and the amount of time needed to study for the exams, I viewed teaching and preparation for them at somewhat of a cross-purpose. Still, the empowerment provided by my limited

exposure to college teaching, including a semester course assignment after I left the program, pointed to where my vital energies were turning.

I pursued teaching more unabashedly after leaving the program through a part time social studies position at an adult high school in my hometown of Rockville. I made the assignment personally challenging by focusing on some of the issues and historical interpretations that I had studied at UCONN, while simplifying content density to enable, essentially, an intelligent, but traditionally, non-academically oriented group of adults to grapple with similar kinds of concerns that stimulate mature scholars. I also developed some unique courses with the intent of pursuing my own intellectual interests, while searching for ways to tap into the curiosity of students in learning something uniquely different, yet connected, however ineffably at times, with personal experience. Whatever limitations there may have been in such an approach, such a pathway represented the only means conceivable that enabled me to be effective in the classroom, as I interpreted the situation, through the perception of my "inner voice."

One such course focused on twentieth-century psychoanalytic thought through a concentration on the founding theories of Sigmund Freud and the derivative psycho-social developmental theory of Erik Erikson. Although potentially foreboding, the subject matter; an exploration of unconscious motivation and the challenges and dilemmas people confront throughout their life-spans is inherently absorbing to most anyone if presented in an appropriate way. A colleague suggested that I should have worked instead with Abraham Mazlow's "hierarchy of needs" theory as more germane to the interests of adult learners and there would have been no problem of bringing in Mazlow, had I thought of it. Yet what the critique ignores is the intellectual passions of the instructor as a potent source of motivation, both for the teacher and for the dynamics of the class environment in a pedagogical setting still highly dependent on strong teacher direction. In this particular environment, my intuition, my most fundamental guide, led me to Freud and Erikson. A quest for dialogue and the demands of teaching, itself,

opened up ways to communicate effectively with the three students who took the summer course. They seemed to have maintained a high interest in the subject matter through our several weeks together where I continually related theory and personal experience to each other.

For another course, I used as a primary text, Joe McGinniss' spellbinding best-seller, *Fatal Vision* (McGiniss, 1983) about Marine Lieutenant Jeffrey McDonald who was accused of brutally stabbing to death his wife and two young daughters. This text provided us with the vehicle to explore some rather complex psychological behavior as well as a format for examining American culture during the Vietnam War era. Passages from "object relations" analyst Otto Kernberg's influential *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism* (Kernberg, 1975) served as an immediate subtext of the course as it did, I believe, for McGinniss' book. Among many other topics, Kernberg's theory of narcissism enabled us to explore the complex issue of unconscious gender identification (a pervasive subtext in this autobiographical excursion), particularly its "pathological" manifestations.

For a more socio-psycho analysis of the 1970s, I also drew on one of the critical texts of the decade, *The Culture of Narcissism* (Lasch, 1978). I emphasized the centrality of post-World War II consumerism as a profound cultural dynamic, linking the late 1960s countercultural quest for expressive individualism to the establishment's search for personal fulfillment in material acquisition through a an overarching value system that exuded "privatism" over civic consciousness. Through intensive questioning and hopefully, sensitive probing, I was often able to provoke unaccustomed, but stimulating intellectual and personal searching through formal academic discourse. Most of the students in my classes had no or limited exposure to "the life of the mind," at least in a school-based intellectual setting. Many, as I did too, relished in the experience.

While the program actively encouraged adults across the life-span to enroll, my teaching style proved reasonably effective. At times, teaching in the adult high school

seemed as intellectually and personally invigorating as any learning experience in which I had ever engaged. Over the course of the next couple of years the program shifted, in effect, from an adult to an alternative high school with a large flux of sixteen to nineteen year-olds streaming into the program. The need to provide educational alternatives for teenagers alienated from the mainstream high school is evident enough. Yet, what we had and lost was fairly unique. That was a challenging learning climate where adults with limited formal education could collaboratively struggle with some of the most significant and probing issues of our time, at least as I understood them to be, through a highly idiosyncratic combination of academic and personal discourse.

However limited, ultimately, part time teaching proved to my perceived need for career development, the transition from an ambivalent graduate school experience to empowerment in the classroom, fulfilled a critical quest to link academic knowledge and personal being. It also represented a move from a somewhat autistic to a more public role as an intellectual. Such a quest to link academic and personal knowledge has remained paramount in its various manifestations throughout my developmental struggle to bolster strong and compelling connections between personal meaning, the life of the mind, and vocation. Since I had no inclination to work in a public high school to which even the alternative school seemed to be turning, I was not able to link the *vocation* of teaching to any realistic career path that I could foresee. Nonetheless, after years of formal education, even part time teaching provided a way of fulfilling a somewhat repressed desire to establish a sense of vocational competence through internalizing the professorial role in seemingly the most unlikely of places.

Still, that path proved neither economically feasible nor emotionally satisfying, particularly from my "male" persona that strove for mastery and singularity of purpose. This "voice" I dared not deny, however much it contradicted other aspects of my personal being and emerging feminist and deconstructionist readings of pluralistic selves and a "de-centered" identity in the postmodern era. However much I labored against

"phallocentric repression," I sensed that my immediate personal crisis required a strong sense of "male" centerdness that remained, nonetheless, an elusive ideal during this time and contrary to other "voices" that I kept in the background.

More emerging than planned, my post-UCONN exodus might be described as a quest to make sense out of career fragments which, while failing to provide any sense of coherency, were replete with creative tension in the desire to fill the perceived gaps among them. Through part time teaching, sales and supervisory work in the home and office contract cleaning industry, and academic research, I expanded my experiential horizons in stimulating ways that remained unconnected to any overall career or project to stabilize a firm identity. Despite the seemingly irreconcilable nature of my varied pursuits, the raggedness of my self-identity compelled me to push my abilities to the limits in their contradictory (according to my self perception) spheres in the quest to break through to some transcendent resolution. This not a religious quest in the traditional sense, but rather, a desire to seek transcendence within experience, by altering personal history.

Although I had not recognized the distinction at the time, in a parallel move, I was beginning to shift from a "Death-of-God" theological orientation (with its "absent" God) toward a "process theology." In the latter, "transcendence" breaks through into living history as a mysterious force, linked, however obliquely to the "Christ event," through the "secular" idioms of our times (Cobb, 1975; Gilkey, 1976). It would take some while before I was able to clarify such theological thought, intellectually, but the origin to this shift resided in the felt hunger for such transcendence within (as I interpreted it) "secular" experience and the episodic "revelations" that it engendered that led me to think theologically.

Contract Cleaning Management

In a limited manner, I experienced a degree of revitalization through teaching. Yet a sense of polarized consciousness between the realms of work and the intellect

marked my primary emotional state, particularly between 1986-1987, when I became a full time supervisor in the contract cleaning field. More than an anomaly, my "felt" experience represented an internalization of the ethos of specialization characteristic of modern professional life. This professional quest for identity tends to drown out and /or incorporate a competing value so pervasive among middle class intellectuals and social visionaries. That is the romantic belief in the potential harmony of self, nature, and community, at least as a regulative ideal for which to strive (Dewey, 1927, 1981, pp. 143-184; Steele, 1987).

My need to establish a career path that nurtured rather than marginalized opportunities for learning, while constrained by some rather restrictive choices, exacerbated the felt gap between intellectual and action-oriented pursuits. I "interiorized" the polar constructs of intellectual and social actor in seemingly divergent psychological and perhaps even physiological "zones" of my self (Kolb, 1984, pp. 56-60). Contemplation represented for me a root metaphor for learning, with its primary attraction, to draw upon David Kolb's categories, "reflective observation," leading to insight. Activity, however, represented another root metaphor (within me) for social efficacy through vocation, with the primary objective of *transforming* reality through purposeful action (Kolb, 1984, pp. 40-41). As a proximate solution to a seemingly intractable dilemma, I finally embraced the dualism between the life of the mind and the world of action during this tumultuous transition from an "unsuccessful" graduate school experience to what ultimately became a more dynamic vocational resolution in the field of adult literacy education.

Part time teaching satisfied certain needs, but the lack of full time teaching opportunities seemed to inhibit prospects of achieving any sense of vocational direction in the field of education. A management position in the contract cleaning industry provided needed (for financial and psychological reasons) full time employment. It also offered the possibility as well, that I might hone skills and expand my experiential base to

establish a career path in management as an alternative vocation and potentially as a compelling field of learning.

Considering my background and temperament, developing any sense of career identity through contract cleaning supervision may seem peculiar, and an attempt, merely, to draw virtue from necessity. This may have been true to the extent that education seemed closed as a field, but the shift to contract cleaning drew on my earlier experience as a sales representative for a small home and office cleaning company while teaching and tutoring part time in the mid-1980s. In that position, I became absorbed with the technology of the cleaning process and impressed with the craftsmanship of the work, particularly as it applied to the home, with the range of fabrics and floor coverings that required intricate attention. I became attentive, also to the organizational dynamics of operating a small business and attuned to the centrality of leadership as one of the most fundamental variables that determine the success or failure of a given enterprise (Bennis and Nanus, 1985). The position, in effect, served as an apprenticeship to my later entry into full time contract cleaning supervision. The experience I attained in the sales position ripened my motivation to pursue this occupational direction.

Progressive management and the challenges of building restoration, itself, represented the primary anchors that enabled me to find at least a degree of purpose in my position of building manager for a contract firm responsible for the evening cleaning of Bradley International Airport in Windsor Locks. Within some extremely tight constraints, I obtained a degree of success with a participatory management approach through team building and flexible, rotating assignments for positions that were basically interchangeable (Steinmetz and Todd, 1979, pp. 113-150). A reasonable number of employees responded to my management style at least for a time. The principle values that I attempted to draw from the employees and to instill, were cooperation, fairness, and pride of workmanship. The technology of airport cleaning proved simple, working largely with wide-open spaces. The craft of management laid in balancing human

resources (absenteeism and turnover proved endemic), weather conditions, and airport traffic. Cleaning the airport nightly provided me with a temporary sense of organic wholeness through the metaphor of "restoration" which it instilled.

Notwithstanding the positive self-esteem, which the position engendered, negative influences diminished its value for me. The competitiveness of the contract cleaning industry aroused intense conflicts among the company, the airport, and the employees that tended to erode the kind of humanistic, consensual work atmosphere that I was attempting to establish. My quest for mastery, achievement, and career coherency conflicted with an organizational culture that I felt powerless to change and exacerbated a gradual sense of increasing boredom that I was beginning to experience in the position. These conflicting forces brought out into the open a repressed dualism between the life of the mind and the world of action that I could no longer ignore.

I sought to bridge the gulf through a study of organizational psychology, which helped somewhat. Yet as a pathway to integration, it failed because I could not reconcile the cross-purposes which brought me to that discipline; the need on the one hand for experiential insight to enhance my understanding of organizational theory, with the need on the other hand, to achieve greater managerial proficiency. No matter how much I began to learn about the new field, and much of the literature remained abstract, this ambivalence eventually called up a deeper yearning for broader, humanistic learning as a more fundamental source of personal being.

Part of the dilemma as well, lay in my position, barely a step beyond direct, hands on supervision, which made it difficult to grasp experientially some of the complex organizational dynamics articulated in such abstruse (to me) publications like *Journal of Management and The Academy of Management Review*. This literature, nonetheless, symbolized a pathway to authentic vocation in management if I could master its labyrinths. Monographs by Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1983) and Edgar H. Schein (1980) proved stimulating and useful to a degree, but cumulatively, there seemed little in the

literature to sustain a comprehensive intellectual project or enough experiential insight to buttress any sense of vocational identity in management. However illusory, I perceived that "authentic vocation" in management could emerge for me through airport cleaning supervision. The "field work" combined with a study of relevant periodicals and monographs, served as a major source of motivation in a postmodern, economically scarce era, with limited vocational opportunities open for the middle class intelligentsia in the neo-conservative society of the late Reagan years. The muting of intellectuals and social visionaries took a variety of paths in the 1980s (Jacoby, 1987; Curry, 1988).

Academic Pursuits

Through the support and direction my former UCONN professor, Richard O. Curry, I drew back into a quest for historical knowledge as a more fulfilling way of satisfying my intellectual desires. The project that I undertook with him was initially part of a new Ph.D. program in Adult Education that I had begun. However I soon dropped out because I did not find it particularly interesting and it interfered with the more dynamic needs and passions that absorbed my attention, given the limited time constraints for the pursuit of any project outside of work. The return to historical writing, however, "took," and Richard Curry as significant other and mentor, played a major catalytic role in calling out and legitimizing my rather idiosyncratic, academic "voice." However unsatisfactory the "two-sphere" approach to work and research felt, returning to history as an independent scholar appeared the best way of anchoring my identity that resonated both with my quest for career coherency and broader, life search for meaning. The price extracted was open avowal of a polarized consciousness. By returning to systematic historical study, I could no longer repress my intellectual quest for sustained critical reflection that was something other than immediately praxeological, no matter how much it seemed to complicate managing a career.

The historical project that I took on; a review of the psycho-historical literature on antebellum (pre-Civil War) abolitionism, served as a good bridge, linking experiential

and academic knowledge, since many of the intra-psychic, identity, and career issues that historians located within the abolitionists, also preoccupied me. Thus, the quest for praxis remained, but became through this project, symbolically mediated through the characterization of historical personages that enabled me to exorcise some of my own conflicts, if only as an act of imagination. I had sort of recognized such a source of motivation as I engaged the study, but as an act of historical writing, I did not know where to go with such a personalized interpretation.

I was particularly absorbed with Lewis Perry's fascinating biography of Henry C. Wright (Perry, 1980) as a result of my own reading of the modern psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg's work on narcissism (Kernberg, 1975). Perry did not directly cite Kernberg, but drew on other "object relations" theorists to construct his image of Wright as irreparably conflicted by a polarized self-concept which alternatively drew upon his mother and father for the irreconcilable self-images upon which he "invested" and "de-invested." Historian Peter Walker relied on a similar gender polarity in his masterful psycho-dynamic portrait of former slave, Frederick Douglass by contrasting the abolitionist's changing self-constructions on race through his three autobiographies (Walker, 1978 209-261).

Personal and academic history became entwined in this essay through the theme of polarized consciousness, grounded significantly within conflicting gender identification which characterized my own struggle, with management and intellectual activity symbolic of unresolved "male" and "female" aspects of my own "persona." Clearly, Perry's Henry C. Wright, served as a compelling mirror through which I looked at my own conflicts. Although it "failed," the essay portended to a direction that linked academic studies and personal experience, which I would continue to pursue over the next decade. Charles Jarvis' study of the career of poet/abolitionist, John Greenleaf Whittier (Jarvis, 1984) helped me to draw other parallels between historical personages and my own personal journey. Jarvis' depiction of Whittier's "career fragments" pointed

to the fragmentation of my then existing vocational struggles. Whittier's ultimate resolution, moreover, in an abolitionist identity shares certain parallels with my own career evolution toward adult literacy education, which, obviously, I could not have foreseen.

Three academic journals rejected the article, which in the final analysis was little more than a comprehensive summary of the psycho-historical literature on abolitionism. I did not have the experience in 1986 to push the "reader-response" interpretation that influenced my personal reading of the literature, as the essay remained grounded in traditional canonical assumptions of the detached observer "surveying" the lay of the historiographical land. The intrinsic satisfaction of the project encouraged me to pursue scholarship as a more authentic form of "restoration" than contract cleaning supervision. The support I received from my mentors, UCONN professors Richard O. Curry and Larry Goodheart, along with the constructive comments from the editors and reviewers, even with the rejection notice, further enflamed that motivation.

Although proven wrong, I felt my analysis of the abolitionist literature would make a significant contribution to the field of psychohistory. That (mis)perception reinforced the intensity of my polarized identity, since true, in any event, I had accomplished *my* best work, to the point, perhaps, of publication, while employed as a night supervisor in the contract cleaning industry. There was nothing inherently contradictory about these two occurrences. Given the countercultural framework of the late 1960s, through which my identity took shape, seemingly anomalous experiences had often proven the impetus that has enabled me to establish a greater sense of purpose.

In the late 1980s, though, I enjoyed less reliance on a 1960s anti-establishment psychic shield against more conformist life pressures, which required that I negotiate a quest for meaning with the very real possibility that career fulfillment or any integration of work and life might remain forever unsatisfied. My dualistic world view, which I

found both energizing and frustrating, served as a primary response to those tensions which were more heightened at that time (1986-1987) than at any other period in my life.

The oppositional social roles that I identified with each of my "spheres" further aggravated the intrapsychic conflict. Given the dualistic paradigm between thought and action embedded in western experience, the lack of career options available to me in academia, the marginalized status of the intellectual in American society, and most emphatically in my line of work, critic and alienated outsider seemed the only *social* identity that I could construct as an *intellectual*. My quest for mastery at work reinforced an alternative social identity, that of organizational change agent, seeking purpose out of a hermeneutical framework that interpreted modern America at best, as a somewhat enlightened business civilization, working for at most, melioristic reform within a very stable structure system. Both roles required sustained psychic energy and a degree of repression within each "sphere." There seemed no easy way of resolving these tensions in the attainment of any "higher" synthesis that might integrate the dualisms of my "lived experience."

Toward Praxis and Continuing Tensions: Pragmatism and Beyond

Entering the Field of Adult Literacy

The dualism gradually shifted, although far from unproblematically, toward a more integrative perspective after I left the cleaning industry upon an offer to serve as a program director for an adult literacy reading center in Hartford in 1987 (Demetrion, 1993). Given my commitment to the life of the mind, such a career move might have seemed evidently clear, yet that was not so apparent at the time. Temperamentally, I maintained strong attachments at least to the illusion of developing, yet, a career in contract cleaning management well into the first year of the new position. I maintained that vision in order to satisfy that "male" component of my psyche which longed for managerial competence through the creative energies of "transformational leadership"

(Bennis and Nanus, 1985, pp. 17, 18). Considering as well, the fiscal uncertainty of the non-profit sector, particularly "pilot" projects like mine, there appeared no *inherent* reason why such a job change would allow me to bring deeper unity out of my sense of polarized identity. In many ways, the position enabled me to *construct* a purposeful work environment through ongoing efforts of continuously meshing my own needs and aspirations with those of the students, volunteers, and staff of Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford (LVGH), and the Bob Steele Reading Center (Demetrion, 1991, 1993, 1994). Such "fusion" did not always taken place in the ever complex organizational environment of operating a growing literacy program in a complicated urban setting like Hartford fueled by corporate, city, state, and private foundational funding. Yet for several years, it had served as a personally imaginative ideal and a powerful source of innovative programmatic development (Demetrion, 2000).

Establishing a sense of purpose during the pioneer phases of the program's history had proven far from an automatic process. I recognized that in any absolute sense, literacy education had no intrinsic merit (Its varied contexts are what make it significant). Creating a more humane workplace for cleaning service personnel represented an objective *at least* as worthy as teaching nonreaders literacy skills, particularly if the latter were not linked to any other dynamic life needs and issues. At the time of the job change, I had developed a challenging avocational commitment to scholarly research and signed up in the fall of 1987 to teach a college history course. These academic pursuits failed to provide coherency to my career identity. Yet in conjunction with the managerial position in contract cleaning, they represented hard won accommodations to seemingly intractable constraints that I could not sunder lightly since such compromises with "reality" gave substance to my struggle for vocation and identity in a highly imperfect world.

Once at work in the literacy field, moreover, initially on a part time basis, I confronted a variety of roadblocks that impeded any easy development of an effective

literacy program. As a nonprofit, volunteer agency, the specter of fiscal and human resource constraints lurked beneath the surface of daily operational activity by threatening to interfere with sustained programmatic development. Endemic "turf" wars between the state and local agency, with the Reading Center serving as a lightening rod for a decade long conflict symptomatic of a top-down structure seeking to shape policy of allegedly "autonomous" affiliates, exacerbated funding and personnel limitations (Demetrion, 1993, pp. 36-37). Considering as well, the seemingly irresolvable dilemmas of student and tutor retention compounded by the marginal status of the volunteer sector in contemporary society, there appeared little in the nature of the situation, itself, to turn such a tenuous job into a vocation, or more compellingly, a "calling." Yet, this is what I sought, however seemingly naive such a traditionally religious purpose appears in the postmodern, secular era characterized by narratives of the anti-heroic "de-centered" self at the end of the twentieth century (Gergen, 1991).

Despite these limitations, several avenues remained open to chart a direction for a program whose direction for growth vitally resonated with my own strengths and inclinations. Although I was an experienced adult educator, initially, I found organizational issues most absorbing. Consequently, I exercised skills honed in my previous position, grounded, however, in earlier non-profit environments, principally religious, where sense of "mission" had been firmly rooted. A primary source of personal satisfaction emerged through facilitative management. I engaged in program development by working cooperatively with adults (students, volunteers, staff) in obtaining valued objectives and helping to establish with and for students a learning climate responsive to at least some of their needs, interests, and aspirations as linked to literacy.

Experiencing reasonable effectiveness in carrying out this responsibility intensified my motivation and sense of purpose (Bandura, 1977, pp. 191-215). This, in turn, reinforced a self-perception that along with *understanding* experience through

reflective observation, I could also help *transform* it through what Kolb characterizes as "active experimentation" (Kolb, 1984, pp. 30-31). I had realized this ability to some capacity in the contract cleaning field and elsewhere. What made similar efforts in adult literacy particularly meaningful was the opportunity to link a sense of efficacy within a value system and social setting that I could more completely embrace.

Scholarly Pursuits Revisited

I experienced considerable satisfaction in the new position, but by concentrating on management, I remained locked in a seemingly thought/action dualism. I sought psychic unity through further study of organizational dynamics, but even in a highly favorable work climate, the same dilemma that I experienced in the contract cleaning company resurfaced: the pursuit of scholarship and efficacious action at work represented divergent desires that I could neither discern nor bring together. I studied organizational psychology partly to obtain a clearer perspective on workplace dynamics, but also for stimulating *intellectual* growth in the quest to achieve what Dewey (1938) refers to as "the intellectual content of experiences" (p. 86). That discipline, though, failed to satisfy my sense of curiosity and wonder, in any profound sense, which I felt compelled to repress in order to vigorously pursue the transformation of an organizational culture (Demetrion, 1993, pp. 31-42).

I worked on intellectual pursuits by returning to historical research in a revision of a graduate school essay on nineteenth-century American religion that I sent to a couple journals for review. The essay was not published, although my mentors at UCONN and Yale Divinity School received it well. Given the abolitionist essay and the encouragement particularly of Richard Curry, whose continual support sustained my intellectual efforts throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, I realized that I had considerably matured as a scholar, even though social outlets for any vocational calling remained for me, lacking, in the academy.

With increasing confidence, I undertook a new research project on the theme of *perfectionism* (in my view, one of the most compelling forces inherent within the American imagination, and certainly pervasive throughout my own autobiography) in the antebellum, pre-Civil War period and reapplied to the Ph.D. program in U.S. History. By the spring of 1988, I seemed to have been working toward a reasonably balanced relationship between vocation and scholarship, although clearly separated within their distinctive "spheres."

Had I taken on only another research project, such a resolution may have sufficed. Even that, though, may have remained problematic. I thought that way because of a sense that my psychic energy would have become too diffused to have exercised the intensity of commitment I believed was necessary to have made the organizational breakthroughs required to transform a tenuous program into a vital center for creative adult literacy learning. (There was that need again, for singularity of purpose, while also striving for harmonious integration of the self).

Re-admission to the Ph.D. program at UCONN however, pushed developmental issues to a crisis. An advantage of independent scholarship is flexibility and freedom. Writing projects can be shelved, if necessary, until an opportune time for their pursuit ensues. Program re-entry induced in me an endurance struggle, with a consequent loss of much inner freedom. I waxed hot on the concept of perfectionism as a dissertation topic and wrote a preliminary ninety-one-page draft. The topic was a logical trajectory of my intellectual development. Specifically it was an attempt to come to terms with the American evangelical tradition and the towering figure of the great revivalist preacher and theologian Charles G. Finney whose religious vision of "Victory Over the World" had an enormous impact on my own religious imagination during the mid-1970s. I felt intuitively that if I could wrap myself around this subject, I would be writing something akin to the "great American novel." This was so, I vaguely sensed at the time, because it could unearth some of the most compelling dynamics of the classical American cultural

experience. This was the quest for something like the Kingdom of God (that is, perfectionism), whether in its specifically Christian (Finney) or transcendentalist (Emerson) version of oneness with nature within American society and culture.

I drew on this half-articulated assumption, notwithstanding a powerful "new left" bias in the field of contemporary historiography that tends to debunk any vestiges of American "exceptionalism" as an authentic hermeneutic and an important source of identity in the past or in the modern period. My intent, as far as I understood it, was to write less from a detached, ironic gaze, than to enter into an imaginative dialogue with the classical perfectionists. This would provide a means of enhancing self and cultural understanding, in part, through a critical relationship between certain nineteenth-century texts and the contemporary work on narcissism, drawing extensively from the "object relations" school of psychoanalysis. My intent was to build upon Lewis Perry's study of Henry C. Wright (Perry, 1980) to undertake a broader, collective biographical approach of some of the major perfectionists of the antebellum era and to trace the vicissitudes of their thought and career through the course of their lives. The hypothesis that I started with assumed a general shift from optimism to pessimism between 1830-1870 on the feasibility of realizing a perfectionist identity. My purpose was to attempt to explain the reasons for the shift and to assess how each of the perfectionists responded to changing historical circumstances.

Through this, I sought to explore the possibilities and "pathologies" of a "self-realization" ethic in its various psychological, cultural, and spiritual manifestations, during the most "expansive" period of American history. Through personal identification with this movement I would draw conclusions, whether or not articulated in the dissertation, on its dramatic role in shaping the contemporary American psyche. This current essay, it might be added, shares some powerful affinities with what I sought to achieve through the aborted study on nineteenth-century American perfectionism. Specifically, the Emersonian-Deweyan persona that I have assumed in this essay, is, in

many respects, a contemporary embodiment of the nineteenth-century perfectionist ideal I sought to study at UCONN. Such an embodiment reinforces the concept of "critical autobiography as a form of living history" that I am attempting to "legitimize" in this essay as a means of engaging in historical studies that transcends the canon of contemporary academic scholarship, yet which speaks compellingly to and through it.

That is, I am attempting to enact for the twenty-first century, the concept of "The American Scholar" as depicted in Emerson's classic 1837 address to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard wherein every person pursues the logic of his own intuitive prompting as the source of personal "genius." Emerson refers to this calling as the work of "the active soul," "the sound estate of every man" (Emerson, cited in Bode and Cowley, 1981, p. 56). It is this activity of reflection on experience, the genius of the American scholar, which compares, too with Dewey's (1938) vision "of intellectual organization [which] can be [only] worked out on the ground of experience" (p.85). Dewey, though, stresses more than Emerson, the relationship between individual consciousness and social ecology as the *environment* through which "creative intelligence" emerges. What drives this current essay *is* such a quest to probe the relationship between "inner" consciousness and the various social contexts that have given shape to it, wherein I privilege my own "genius" over "objective" analysis, though I far from discount social reality. Thus, there is a certain linkage in my desire to study the perfectionist ideology of the American Transcendentalist experience and my own autobiographical experience that I am attempting to enact in the writing of this essay, which I refer to as critical autobiography as a form of living history. Both Emerson and Dewey, and for that matter, Finney as well, serve as critical role models for the endeavor.

Notwithstanding the drive to undertake the perfectionist project, the specter of the general exams continued to haunt me. No matter how much my scholarship matured since leaving the program in 1983, such development failed to compensate for a learning style that seemed to me, hopelessly at odds with the way those tests were structured. A

rejection notice on one of my essays after attempts with several publishers rekindled an apprehension that a professional university career in history was virtually out of the question. At age forty, continuing with the Ph.D. program at the developmental price it appeared I would have to pay in the retardation of a purposeful career identity in something both tangible and resonate with meaning, seemed absurd.

Organizational Change Agent

Responding both to the perceived needs of the work environment and my own drive for managerial competency, I focused predominantly on organizational dynamics in my first two years in the position. Drawing support from different quarters, various colleagues and I charted out the goals for the second year: moderate growth and increased visibility for the program and greater linkage of the Reading Center with LVGH. We also began to search for a permanent, common site for the Center and the local affiliate, which might end the culture wars between the state and local agency and provide the Reading Center with a more stable footing (Demetrion, 1993, pp. 34-40).

A historical analysis of the Reading Center's development moves beyond the intent of this essay, although I have written about this elsewhere. (Demetrion, 1993). A felt sense of "efficacy" is the principle *autobiographical* point stressed here, in an ability to significantly influence an appropriate course of action in a setting meaningful both on a personal and societal basis, yet strewn with a plethora of potential stumbling blocks. *Perceiving* organizational dilemmas represented an important *intellectual* exercise, but implementing effective solutions represented a *managerial* process, requiring an ability to help transform a complex and somewhat frozen social environment and work culture into something considerably more dynamic.

Acting as an effective change agent confirmed my commitment to vocation (rather than scholarship) as my primary task at this "stage" of life, at least as an operative ideal with which to move forward. Yet, in transferring psychic energy from the study of history to my role at the Reading Center, an emotional vacuum persisted, which I tried to

fill through greater managerial exertions. While at times effective, such an intensification of psychic energy in that sphere proved out of synchronization with the organizational climates out of which I operated. My need to find fulfillment in this way resulted in personal stress and an unhealthy expansion of ego, difficult to contain, notwithstanding the sense of efficacy and fulfillment also engendered.

Discovering the Field of Literacy Education

Out of a desire to tap into the more reflective aspects of my self or what Kolb refers to as the "intentional," I undertook another revision of the religious history essay that had been rejected for publication. While impulsive to an extent, the month-long effort provided needed detachment and represented a search to keep current activities grounded in broader life-projects. The effort soon proved less satisfying as time, but more importantly, what time signified; the psychic energy required to write, which conflicted with the more pressing goals I sought to accomplish in program management.

While hunting down books for the historical project, I wandered over to the educational section and came across Myron C. Tuman's, *A Preface to Literacy: An Inquiry Into Pedagogy, Practice and Progress* (1987). What struck an immediate chord was certainly not the specific content of the book, which required three readings before I obtained a reasonable understanding of it. It was, rather, what certain theologians refer to as a *kairotic moment*, or "a new creative possibility [the breaking in of transcendence within history] even in the most desperate of historical situations" (Gilkey, 1991, p. 121) which this was not, in my own personal quest. A new perception, one for which I had been searching, transpired almost instantaneously through an absorption of the symbolic importance of the title within my psyche along with a skim of the text and chapter headings. In a word, the book served as a symbol, sending a message that literacy *education* (rather than management, on my reading) had the potential of being at least as sophisticated as the study of history, which I might realize if I pursued it unabashedly.

Turning to literacy education enabled me to achieve a certain "fusion" between the life of the mind and the world of action that stimulated my motivation as a practitioner and researcher. Yet, what I sought through what Tuman represented was not easily reconcilable with the objectives of praxis. As a researcher, I sought to draw upon certain experiences at the Bob Steele Reading Center as a phenomenological grounding point to engage in a critical analysis of American society and culture through various, elliptical glances at literacy. To accomplish this, I chose "to read what one would never hear and to write what one would never say" (Tuman, 1987, p. 28) in the daily discourse of adult literacy practice. Although I had not recognized the connection at the time, my thinking was in line with Tuman's that "[w]riting is a fundamental act of social betrayal" (Tuman, 1987, p. 32). That is, in my intellectual probing, I sought to extend the metaphor of literacy beyond the daily expectations of the on-going program. I sought to press toward its social and cultural "meaning" as I understood it, from the perspective of a very centered self, the solitary historical thinker, however deeply enmeshed in the pragmatics of daily social praxis. Although my reach extended considerably beyond my grasp, had I understood it at the time, I would have resonated with Tuman's interpretation of literacy and applied it to my research projects at the Reading Center:

> As compared with ordinary conversation, the communicative power of literate texts [and Tuman means whether in written or spoken forms] requires of both readers and writers the negotiation of meanings that rise above, transcend, or in some sense cross expectations based upon ordinary social experience. In establishing meaning independent of expectations, literate texts fundamentally extend the power of metaphor to redescribe the world. While language can and often does affirm our interpretation of the world, in metaphor it exhibits the power to unfold before us a new unexpected way of understanding by forcing us to recognize that a literal reading of an assertion will not work, that a given verbal account of the world is inapplicable, given a specific context, and therefore that, if the account is to be taken seriously and not dismissed, we must interpret it in a new or 'figurative' way (Tuman, 1987, p. 17).

Notwithstanding these underlying complexities (little of which I could have articulated at the time, but had a felt sense of them), this shift to literacy education

enabled me to integrate theory and practice at least as an act of imagination that had considerable impact on praxis. Through such released energies, I found the drive to write extensively on the Reading Center experience through the prism of John Dewey's theory of education as continual growth through the *enhancement* of experience, a viewpoint which is also reflected throughout much of this essay. I do not argue (nor did Dewey) that growth is inevitable but that the quest for the enhancement of experience *seems* something like a core human drive that is particularly amplified in the American psychic search for "self-realization." These studies, it might be added, were written in the praxeological vein. That is, I wrote them in an effort to explain the dynamism inherent in the program's learning climate and organizational culture, as I understood it. I did so for the purpose, in no small part, of legitimizing it and extending its influence in the broader LVA and Adult Basic Education (ABE) culture, regionally and on the national landscape (Demetrion, 1993, 1994). Through this, I also sought to transform my own peculiar idiosyncratic notions into a legitimate, public "voice" and as well to explore the "intellectual organization" (Dewey, 1938, p. 85) of experience as I imaginatively sought to portray what I felt.

Through the research on the Reading Center, I have sought to depict the series of transformations (as I have understood them) that have marked the program's growth, itself through what I have called elsewhere, "the force field of potentiality" via the "literacy myth." Through these ideas I sought to develop an educational program that could enhance life particularly in the realm of "self-realization," and secondarily through community building, which *could* have a residual impact on material well being. I have interpreted this "force field of potentiality" based upon Dewey's core concept of "growth," both as a significant source of the program's *organizational* development and as a specific *pedagogical* value that has underlain much of the instructional program at the Reading Center (Demetrion, 2000). I am aware of a certain moral ambivalence in propagating such a vision, and a more complex understanding of adult literacy provision

is beginning to emerge for me that focuses on the stimulation of hope as a spiritual phenomenon even amidst conditions that might more logically provoke only despair. Yet, in the "real world" of adult literacy provision, I had believed for much time (and still do, to a significant degree) that the self-realization "myth" through literacy provides an avenue for going forward. I have interpreted the "literacy myth," therefore more benignly than Harvey Graff (1979), who concentrates on the gap between the promise of literacy and the fallacy of its relationship to socio-economic mobility. I do not dispute the latter in any widespread, statistical sense (Demetrion and Gruner, 1995). Yet, as a practitioner, I continually witness the profound manner in which literacy *does* work for many individuals in many concrete ways in daily life. I also appreciate the more ineffable expressions of enhanced self-esteem and spiritual development wherein *"The Word"* (and I am using a core biblical symbol more symbolically, here) clearly has a transformative power in people's lives (Fingeret and Danin, 1991; Lestz, Demetrion, and Smith, 1994, Demetrion, 1994; Demetrion and Gruner, 1995).

This broad-based Deweyan force field of potentiality, defined as growth through literacy, set in motion a course of action for which I strove to transform the Bob Steele Reading Center into a progressive literacy laboratory/research center as an imaginative "ends-in-view. " I found this teleological "end point" simultaneously motivating and frustrating—the latter because no one else shared the "fullness" of the vision as I had perceived it, although many grasped various glimpsed of it and obviously interpreted the Reading Center from their own particular slants.

In many respects, the attempt to integrate my practice as a literacy program manager with research in the field has served as a compelling, although highly idiosyncratic resolution to an enduring conflict between vocation and identity that continues to perplex me. I have internalized a type of "reader-response" view of Cochran-Smith's and Lytle's, *Inside/Outside: Teacher Research and Knowledge* (1993) as a way of validating my own research project of "critical autobiography as living

history;" utilizing critical reflection and theory as a way of explaining certain experiences at the Reading Center. Thus, my longer-range intellectual project was to reflect on the development of the program through historical lenses during the very process of helping to create the history to be analyzed and to continue the analysis through a more distanced gaze after I left the program. This quest, I believe, served as a primary source for my own personal motivation at the Reading Center. In certain compelling ways it proved largely successful in bringing together my own need to move toward organic wholeness as a program manager of a vigorous community of adult literacy learners and tutors (Kolb, 1984, p. 136). At its most expansive height, the Reading Center environment seems to evoke a "consummation," or self-realization of experience that the philosopher John Dewey equates with art:

> Experience in the degree to which it *is* (original emphasis) experience is heightened vitality. Instead of signifying being shut up within one's private feelings and sensations, it signifies active and alert commerce with the world; at its height it signifies complete interpenetration of the self and the world of objects and events. Instead of signifying surrender to caprice and disorder, it demonstrates our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmatic and developing. Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in the world of things, it is art in germ. Even in its rudimentary forms, it contains the promise of that delightful perception which is esthetic experience (McDermott, 1981, p. 540).

Such a conception of "continuous becoming" represented the Reading Center vision at its apogee, which played an important role in program construction. I also experienced less optimistic moments of bringing thought and action to fusion at the Bob Steele Reading Center.

Practitioner/Research Dualisms Revisited

Tuman (1987), and later, Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) provided considerable help in enabling me to integrate theory and practice, at least as an act of creative imagination in the field of adult literacy education. As a result, I had achieved a certain "praxeology" through the development of a stimulating program and various research

projects that examine the Reading Center and LVGH from a variety of angles that may be of interest to practitioners and researchers, probably for different reasons.

• Such a heightened point of cohesion, however, left gnawing questions in stabilizing a personal identity and in operating an urban adult literacy program over an extended period of time. Although certain confluences between these forces took place and remained operative to a significant degree throughout my tenure at the Bob Steele Reading Center, the stream of time moved on and old configurations became re-arranged. I had always sensed certain limitations in the Deweyan force field of potentiality. Yet, I felt impelled to allow its energies full vent, given its proximate influence on the immediate environment and the centrality of "self-realization" as a powerful cultural myth that I internalized and that I drew upon to enhance the learning climate of the Reading Center. In order to achieve personal significance as a historical actor, I needed to seek the full potential of this Emersonian-Deweyan moment of progressive "becoming." Only by following this trajectory to its logical conclusions, could I realize the potential for the Reading Center, as I understood it. Doing so enabled me to experience *where*, *when*, *how*, and the *extent* to which the inevitable constraints actually butted up against the organic vision that drove me within the context of living history. I always sensed that as a counterpoise to the Deweyan dynamic of "growth," the Reading Center was also embedded in a social environment was very much shaped by Max Weber's "iron cage" bureaucracy of social determinism. In my view this countervailing force, what Habermas (1987) refers to as the "colonization of the lifeworld," is a more powerful tendency operative in the historical landscape of twentieth-century urban institutional life. As long as the upward spiral toward enhanced "becoming" prevailed, the Deweyan synthesis between pragmatic constructivism and intellectual analysis held, at least as an integrative act of imagination, which also served as a potent source of personal motivation.

A key Deweyan assumption is that critical thought evolves from conflicts or perplexities which emerge from lived experience that upsets normal expectations (Dewey, 1925). This view represents a fundamentally different epistemology than that advocated by "critical theory," based purely on rational analysis grounded in an *a priori*, ideological slant; what Dewey would refer to as the "spectral" logic of abstract thought. The doubt (partial, though it was) cast on my own Deweyan ideal of a community of literacy learners seeking "perspective transformation" through education, originated more from conflicts and contradictions personally experienced than through a perusal of critical texts. Once "felt," new readings played a significant role in helping me to identify emerging issues to which I had previously given scant attention.

The primary perplexity is that my Deweyan (and, to be more contemporaneous; Habermasian) quest for communicative consensualism provided little place for confronting conflict, pluralism, and power. This included attention to my own "will to power," as the obverse and egocentric shadow of the "transformative leader" under duress trying to hold together a Deweyean vision of the Bob Steele Reading Center under the increasingly "normalizing" complex LVGH organizational culture seeking legitimacy within the city of Hartford. What moved me away from praxis as a complete ideology, in part, was recognition of the limitations of my own management style in the increasingly complex organizational environment that was emerging. Given the "impossibility" of radicalism (Diggins, 1992) as applied to mainstream literacy programs and the profound limitations that I began to experience through my appropriation of Dewey's pragmatic philsophy of "growth," I began to experience increased alienation in my role at the Reading Center, five years into the position.

In addition to the politics of literacy and the limitations of my management style, at issue also was the ambiguous role of the intellectual in a modern, profoundly utilitarian society. The founder of American pragmatism, Charles S. Peirce, articulated the dilemma a century ago in the distinction he made between teaching and learning.

Substitute management for teaching and Peirce's observation captures the alienation about which I am speaking once the Deweyan synthesis began to erode as a more or less unproblematic praxeology:

In order that a man's [sic] whole heart may be in teaching he must be thoroughly imbued with the vital importance and absolute truth of what he has to teach; while that in order that he may have any measure of success in learning he must be permeated with the sense of unsatisfactoriness of his present condition of knowledge. The two attitudes are almost irreconcilable (Diggins, 1994, p. 204).

Reflecting on this problem, John P. Diggins, one of the foremost historians of the American mind, comments, that, "[w]hile society requires beliefs for its very survival, science itself cannot survive except on the basis of doubt and negation" (Diggins, 1994, p. 204). The profoundest challenge for me, as I understand it, was whether I could develop the psychic, intellectual, and spiritual resources both to live with and to seek space beyond the Peircean polarity through a combination of imaginative embracing and distancing of these seemingly contradictory realms. The challenge was to simultaneously enact the role of the practitioner through the praxeological imagination, while exploring those areas of adult literacy that I found so compelling and intellectually absorbing (like this essay) whether or not it had any immediate impact on program functioning. The roles that I sought at the Reading Center; as "public intellectual" (Jacoby, 1987), "teacher-researcher" (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993), and "reflective practitioner" (Schon, 1983), remained salient to much of my practice and certain research projects in the quest to enhance thought and action through a probing dialectic between them.

Yet, ambivalently poised within this Deweyan-Habermasian self that sought an unrealizable consensual community through "perspective transformation" lurked the free-floating intellectual caught among the webs of hope and skepticism and freedom and

programmatic and personal reconstruction through a compelling Deweyan vision of the integrative self. The partial breakdown of this synthesis enabled and sometimes forced these shadow voices to surface. All of these voices currently reside within me as I continue to work out the relationship between vocation and identity as perpetual quest in the field of adult literacy education five years after leaving the Bob Steele Reading Center.

An American historian in search of a calling. An American Scholar.

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Yet, ambivalently poised within this Deweyan-Habermasian self that sought an unrealizable consensual community through "perspective transformation" lurked the free-floating intellectual caught among the webs of hope and skepticism and freedom and necessity. As a praxeologist, I remained committed to the quest for continuous program improvement, even while recognizing the "mythology" of such a belief. From this slant, I embraced what was for me a necessary optimistic ideology in order to sustain the psychic energy needed to help effect the limited and highly ambiguous, but significant work of an adult literacy educator operating a mainstream program in a mid-sized city. To accomplish this, I drew, in part, on the pedagogy and broader pragmatic vision of John Dewey (1927) in his quest for the "Great Community." In this role, I tended to deflect some of the more disturbing issues of power and conflict that troubled more radical scholars in providing adult literacy education in post-industrial Hartford. Very few of the students at the Bob Steele Reading Center were likely ever to find employment in the city's "informational processing" sector, in which the vast majority of good paying jobs reside. Yet the promise that literacy results in upward mobility served as an underlying subtext that fueled the imagination and hope of many students. Notwithstanding the limitations of the "literacy myth" (Graff, 1979), when linked to Dewey's concept of "growth," it did provide avenues for moving our program forward. This, in turn, enabled more than a few adult literacy learners to achieve what some would view as modest, but personally important benefits through extensive participation in the program (Demetrion, in press; Demetrion and Gruner, 1995; Fingeret and Drennon, 1997).

By the end of my tenure at the Bob Steele Reading Center in 1996, I held to my role as a Deweyan praxeologist in considerable tension with those of the observationalist historian, the skeptical intellectual, the existential self, and the postmodern evangelical Christian (Brueggemann, 1993). All of these latter perspectives provided interpretive angles that look more unflinchingly at the darker dimensions of experience than what was

likely through the reflective, profound optimism of John Dewey's progressive reform philosophy. For most of my tenure, these counterforces served as "shadow" voices that I held at bay through an imaginative, but far from totally fictitious activity of programmatic and personal reconstruction through a compelling Deweyan vision of the integrative self. The partial breakdown of this synthesis enabled and sometimes forced these shadow voices to surface. All of these voices currently reside within me as I continue to work out the relationship between vocation and identity as perpetual quest in the field of adult literacy education five years after leaving the Bob Steele Reading Center.

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